



GRALLERS SO NAT, Catalonia / Spain

One of the popular institutions that shape the world of traditional music in **Catalonia** is that of the grallers, which is defined by the characteristic and charismatic instrument that the *gralla* is. Such sharply conical rustic oboe produces a powerful sound by means of a double cane tongue named *inxà*. Its music is ever-present in many of Catalan celebrations and festivities in the recent centuries.

The performance of *grallers* has been closely linked to the raising of human castles, towers and pillars, to such extent that it has become the obliged accompaniment not only of the exercise in itself (tolling of castells), but also of the customary practices that surround it: the announcement (*matinades* or *albadès*), passacaglia, salutes (entrance/arrival at the square), procession and tollings and chimings of the festivity as well as withdrawal, when the human castles are over (such as the vermouth chimings). Such a successful exclusivity of the *gralla* at the moment of the raising of the human towers would derive from the fact that it already was of the *moixiganga*, one of dances which are the forerunners of the modern castells.

This performance of the instrument, which would spread over a very particular area of the New Catalonia (Penedès, Camp de Tarragona, The Basin of Barberà), does not remain consigned to this exclusive use; on the contrary, it reached all of the aspects of the festive ambit (such as the ball de gitanes [gipsy dances], the ball de bastons [stick dance], and so on), thus resolving the musical content of the festivity in a nearly complete manner, especially in the towns and small villages that could not afford facing great expenditures. For this reason, a varied repertoire was created and adjusted, particularly in the performance of the dances that were in fashion; this involved, as time went by, an improvement of the instrument, which took place towards the end of the 19th century.

The group of *grallers* -formed by two, three or four gralles and one or two bass drums-, together with all the harmonic and rhythmic possibilities that became feasible, was created not only as a widespread formation of a remarkable cultural and festive weight, since it also became a financial institution that generated a network of relationships and behaviours, which at the same time created certain habits and even bohemian habits whose fame has reached our times. Oral as well as written tradition, as well as the recent research carried out by some experts, show us the huge number of popular musicians who devoted themselves to the *gralla* and the bass drum in the aforementioned regions, many of which have remained anonymous for ever more. At this first golden age of the *gralla*, before World War I from 1914 to 1918, the institution of the *grallers* got established -although timidly- in other parts of Catalonia (Vallès, Maresme, western regions). We should also bear in mind the continuous presence of the *grallers* hired in the city of Barcelona.

Later on there was a decadence, a decline, in accordance to what Emili Miró explains in a letter he sent to the magazine "Gralla", of Vilanova i la Geltrú, in 1977: "... it is curious to stress that both (the *gralla* and the *human towers*) have been so closely related that from 1915 to 1925, they were on the point of dying together..." Such process would reach its highest point with the publication, at the beginning of the thirties, of the record of *La Compañia del Gramófono*, by the group of *grallers* from the town of Vendrell Antics Romeas, wich comprises the recording of the *Toc de Matinades* and the *Toc de Castells*, of a high

performance quality. The brochure of the aforementioned Society also states another record from de same grallers, with the *Toc de Processó* and a *Llevant de Taula*, although we do not know whether these were marketed at all.

Once the Civil War was over, there were a few groups of grallers left which, as time went by, confine themselves to the accompaniment of traditional dances and plays, to being present at some major festivities and, above all, to the world of the human towers. This crisis becomes more acute and worsens during the sixties, due to the significant changes in lifestyle that the society of that time underwent; this circumstance, together with other facts, contributes to making the institution of the *grallers* look anachronistic.

During the seventies, simultaneously with the expansion of the human towers, and within the process of a general recovery undergone by many aspects of popular and traditional culture, there is a rebirth of the institution of the grallers, which had and incidence in social strata quite different from those that had originally supported this association. The most significant features of such recovery were a strong urban introduction and an extraordinary geographical spreading, which comprised all the Catalan regions. This fact is concomitant with the spreading movement of many displays of folklore and popular culture, such as the dances of devils and above all, the giants and other popular plays.

The character of the *gralla* player has also played quite a number of roles. Although many groups appear in accordance with the traditional formation, that is, as semi-professional musicians that form stable ensembles attaining a certain artistic level (and that are hired or asked for), there are also grallers -or gralla players- that belong to teams or groups which are not exclusively devoted, nor to any particular activity, such as the *groups of geganters* -giants- in which, besides the grallers, other people take part performing different functions. In the other extreme, we may find professional or semi-professional musicians that use the gralla integrating varied instrumental groups, belonging to the field of traditional music or entertainment theatre.

In any case, we are living a culminating, decisive and most interesting moment of the graller world - such as the recent and extensive record production proves-, this being a varied reality that we may not measure by means of a single pattern.

So Nat's Discography:

Grallers So Nat: *Moixigangues, Valencians i Castells* - 2004

Grallers So Nat: *Ball de gralles Sound System* – 2006

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